

# WHY?

## *We Hear You!*



### CHESTERFIELD COUNTY 2009 COMMUNITY YOUTH FORUM RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



## ON Nov. 19, 2009...

the 15th annual Community Youth Forum was held at the Chesterfield Technical Center. The event, entitled, WHY? – We Hear You!, brought together area youths and adults to discuss issues that are affecting young people in our community. The Youth Services Citizen Board, the Chesterfield County Department of Youth Planning and Development and the Midlothian Kiwanis Club are proud sponsors of the event.

Although there is a Community Youth Forum each year, each event is special and unique. Forum participants celebrated the county's designation as one of the 100 Best Communities for Young People for the third consecutive year, an award presented by America's Promise – Alliance for Youth as part of a national competition.

The forum is another example of why Chesterfield County is a great place for young people to live. Community leaders listen to what young people have to say and take their suggestions to heart.

Dr. Linda Hancock, director of the Wellness Resource Center at Virginia Commonwealth University, used audience participation to demonstrate how marketing tactics lure young people to buy energy drinks that have a high alcoholic content and to inform them about how harmful these drinks can be. Through her humor and high energy, she related that the misperceptions young people often have about their peers' involvement in behaviors such as smoking and alcohol use can influence their decision making. Using a real-life demonstration, she allowed several youths to measure an ounce of water into a cup to prove that youths don't realize how much alcohol they're consuming when drinking. She also used community data to reveal that most of our

community's young people are healthier than we think – most do not smoke or use alcohol, and they do not use drugs. Hancock encouraged participants to use this knowledge to make healthy choices.

Armed with a fresh approach to looking at community issues, participants divided into three groups; middle-school students, high-school students and adults. All participants discussed two topics: TMI – Too Much Information, and Pharming and Skittling: "The New Buzz."

The groups provided their insights, ideas

and recommendations for addressing youth-related concerns. Each discussion group was facilitated by a member from the Youth Services Citizen Board.

The forum was a success thanks to the young people and adults who took precious time out of their busy lives to share their ideas with others. We greatly appreciate the participation of all who attended and provided this very important feedback! This report contains the results and recommendations provided by each discussion group. Youth Planning and Development is delighted to share the opinions and suggestions of our Chesterfield County youths and adults.

### WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE NEED TO SUCCEED

Although there are many different youth-development models and many different approaches, the experts agree that to be successful, all young people need the following:

- Ongoing relationships with caring adults
- Safe, structured activities during non-school hours
- Healthy lifestyle practices to promote a healthy transition to adulthood
- School success and a marketable skill
- Opportunities to give back to the community

## WHAT ARE DEVELOPMENTAL ASSETS?

Why do some young people grow up with ease while others struggle? Why do some get involved in dangerous activities, while others spend their time making contributions to the community?

Many factors influence why some young people have success and why others struggle. Economic circumstances, genetics, trauma and many other factors play roles. But these factors are not all that matter. Research conducted by the Search Institute has identified 40 concrete, positive experiences and qualities, which they term “developmental assets,” that have a positive influence on each young person’s life.

The Search Institute surveyed more than 200,000 youths in sixth through 12th grade to determine the relationship between developmental assets and types of behaviors.

The 40 developmental assets promote the involvement of the entire community in building specific skills that young people need to be successful. Research found

that the more skills, or assets, a young person has, the less likely the young person will engage in negative behaviors such as drug use and violence. The relationship between high levels of assets and fewer risky behaviors and more healthy behaviors holds true for all the young people surveyed, no matter their ethnic heritages, languages, economic situations or geographical locations.

The traditional approach to addressing youth problems has been to fix the problems. Focusing on developmental assets requires a paradigm shift, a change in attitude moving beyond fixing the problems and moving toward affirming and increasing the strengths of young people. Developmental assets are not simply programs for young people; they are about adults building positive relationships with young people and seeing youths as resources. Young people also are responsible for building developmental assets for themselves.

Young people are clearly a priority in Chesterfield County. Youth Planning and Development is charged with providing leadership in the coordination of planning, research and evaluation of services for our youths. The goal is to ensure that we live in an environment where every young person feels welcome, respected, cared for and useful. Programs such as this Community Youth Forum provide an opportunity for our community to come together and strengthen developmental assets for its most important asset, our youth.



## DISCUSSION TOPICS

### **TMI – TOO MUCH INFORMATION**

*What are the consequences and/or benefits of sharing too much information?*

*How do we educate the community on sharing too much information?*

### **PHARMING AND SKITTLING: “THE NEW BUZZ”**

*What are the consequences of abusing prescription and over-the-counter drugs and what are the benefits of staying strong?*

*How do we educate the community on “the new buzz”?*



## **TMI – Too Much Information**

*What are the consequences and/or benefits of sharing too much information?*

*How do we educate the community on sharing too much information?*

Computers, cell phones and MP3 players have become ubiquitous in today's culture, particularly among our youths. They are an immediate way for teens to communicate with peers, get or share information and be entertained. As technology changes and evolves, it is important for parents, educators and teens to be aware of both the benefits and consequences of "TMI," or too much information, shared.

Many in the group acknowledged that the primary benefit of today's technology is the ability to communicate instantly with people across the world, as well as maintain their friendships. Communicating through MySpace, Facebook or YouTube has provided youths an avenue for self-expression. The Internet also enables shy teens the opportunity to establish friendships. Another benefit for using the technology available is for the purposes of education.

The disadvantages of being connected all the time, according to the group, include sharing personal information that should be kept private, spending too much time online, the potential for bullying, identity theft and the risk of being lured into inappropriate behavior. The same anonymity that can protect you can also harm you, as anyone can post harmful photos, YouTube videos or information about peers in an attempt to bully them or just for fun. Information posted on social media can ruin your reputation, hinder scholarships or acceptance to colleges, embarrass family members, or even damage future employment opportunities.

The adults and some of the youths agreed on the necessity for parents to monitor their child's use of the Internet, including checking their MySpace or Facebook pages, to monitor the amount of time spent online, as well as what is on their page and who has access to it, and adding parental controls.

According to the youths, they've received education about TMI from their parents, school and friends. The youths also feel that teens provide personal information or pictures because they are seeking attention, are pressured by their peers and/or don't understand the consequences of their actions.

### **Recommendations from the youth groups:**

- Educate the community and schools through assemblies by sharing stories of incidents that have occurred from sharing too much information.
- Develop public service announcements that can be shared with the community as well as schools.
- Educate the community on the benefits and consequences of sharing too much information.
- Encourage youths to "friend" their parents on MySpace or Facebook.

**Recommendations from the youth and adult groups:**

- Parents monitor Internet usage as well as cell phones, MySpace or Facebook pages. Keeping your computer in an open area, parental controls and awareness are some tools for monitoring your child's usage.
- Parents are encouraged to become technology savvy.
- Have a mandatory educational class for parents and youths on social media and the consequences of posting inappropriate material.

**Additional recommendations from adults:**

- Work to develop a law that prohibits youths under a certain age from sharing personal information.
- Encourage positive peer groups to support choices.
- Provide a controlled environment for youths and adults to educate on the consequences of too much information.
- It is important for parents to know who has access to their child's Facebook, MySpace or Twitter sites.
- Encourage discussions about displaying too much information on social media at the dinner table or provide an opportunity for you and your child to engage in role reversals.



## TIPS FOR STAYING SAFE ONLINE

### Learn the 4 Rs

- **RECOGNIZE** techniques used by online predators to deceive.
- **REFUSE** requests for personal information.
- **RESPOND** assertively if you are ever in an uncomfortable situation online. Exit the program, log off or turn off the computer, tell a trusted adult, or call the police.
- **REPORT** to a trusted adult any suspicious or dangerous contact that makes you feel uncomfortable.

### Tips for parents to keep your child safe

- Always keep your child's computer in an open area.
- Communicate. There is no better tool to bridge the Digital Divide.
- Become a part of your child's online experience.
- Regularly review your child's computer files.
- Teach your child the responsible use of online resources.
- Talk to your child about online dangers.
- Educate yourself on the ins and outs of the Internet.
- Talk to other parents about your experiences. It will help everyone.
- Let your child know that responsible adults do not pursue relationships with minors

### Resource links for parents:

[isafe.org](http://isafe.org)

[netsmartz.org](http://netsmartz.org)

[wiredsafety.org](http://wiredsafety.org)

## SAFETY TIPS FOR TEENS

- Guard your identifying information (name, sex, age, address, school, teams). It only takes a little information for a predator to identify you.
- Always remember, responsible adults do not pursue relationships with kids and teens.
- Make your username and online profile generic and anonymous.
- Know how to exit an inappropriate Web site.
- Attachments in e-mails from strangers can contain viruses and worms.
- Pictures are great to hand to a friend, but it's not cool to send them to an Internet "friend."
- Posting your picture on the Internet gives hackers the chance to doctor your picture and make fun of you to everyone on the Internet. This is called cyber bullying.
- Chat room "friends" are not always who they say they are.
- Know the rules about intellectual property. Do not illegally download music and movies.

### Resource links for teens:

[kids.getnetwise.org](http://kids.getnetwise.org)

## **PHARMING AND SKITTLING: "THE NEW BUZZ"**

*What are the consequences of abusing prescription and over-the-counter drugs and what are the benefits of staying strong? How do we educate the community on "the new buzz"?*

Transitions can be very difficult times in the lives of our youths. Moving from elementary school to middle school, from middle school to high school or from high school to work all require students to venture into new environments. It is important to have confidence in yourself and your values before you enter into a new situation.

The abuse of prescription drugs and over-the-counter medicines is the fastest growing form of substance abuse. Nationally, prescription drug abuse kills more teens than cocaine, heroin and methamphetamines combined. A 2007 survey of youths in Chesterfield County revealed that past 30-day use of prescription narcotics and sedatives by high school seniors was 40 percent above the national average.

Friends and family are the most common source of prescription drugs misused by youths in the U.S. Around half of youths who reported misusing prescription stimulants, tranquilizers or sedatives in the past year said that they most recently obtained the medication for free from friends or family.

The groups first focused on why teens are choosing to experiment with prescription and over-the-counter drugs. They concluded that peer pressure is a key factor, along with socializing with older kids, popularity, depression and family influence. It is also important to note that the groups felt that TV and/or music influences are huge reasons for drug abuse, as well as youths feeling like they are invincible and just wanting to try something new.

The discussion groups also explored the ability of teens to obtain prescription and over-the-counter drugs. First, the youths commented on how parents are oblivious to the epidemic of abusing these medicines. Second, the youths said that teens are clearly aware that they can obtain drugs from home, parents and friends because prescription and over-the-counter drugs are so easily accessible.

Another area the groups discussed was what type of prescription and over-the-counter drugs are being abused and where. Adults and youths agreed that teens are abusing Aderall, Valium, Oxycontin, Xanax, Advil, Day/NyQuil, Percocet and Hydrocodone. Parents should be aware of signs such as hyperactivity, insomnia, impaired judgment, accidents and anger when youths are experimenting or abusing medicines.

The adults acknowledged that many youths don't realize how great the consequences of their actions are on their future. Some of the consequences that both the adults and youths discussed were the loss of relationships, loss of self-respect, brain damage, academic failure, personality changes, failure to obtain employment or attend college, and death.

Teens stated that they are being educated about drug abuse from TV programs such as "The Oprah Winfrey Show," school, parents and friends. Some of the teen participants are aware that drug abuse can happen at any age. However, most of them believe it starts in middle school. They also are aware that abusing prescription and



over-the-counter drugs can lead to death or an allergic reaction when mixing various drugs and/or alcohol.

Parents can help by being open with their children by listening and teaching them how to handle uncomfortable situations with their peers. It is important to have confidence in yourself and your values before you enter into a new situation.

One recommendation that involves the entire community is to help youths understand the danger of prescription and over-the-counter drugs. When parents bring home their newborns, they baby-proof the house, so why don't parents "teen-proof"? Parents should think about removing unneeded prescription and/or over-the-counter medicines, limiting the availability and keeping track of all prescription drugs, and educating their teens about the dangers of abusing drugs of any kind.

#### **Recommendations from adult groups:**

- Implement programs that start discussing prescription or over-the-counter drug dangers in school and in the community.
- Provide positive social outlets and engage children in various activities.
- Educate parents on proper disposal of medications and establish a campaign for drug drop-off.
- Teach children how to make positive choices for themselves.
- Collaborate with PTAs in order to educate children at an earlier age.

#### **Recommendations by the youth groups:**

- Educate all students during assemblies with skits and presentations.
- Educate through Edline and the county's automated phone system.
- Organize more Youth Forums for youths, as well as for parents.
- Encourage parents who are educated about prescription and over-the-counter drug abuse to educate other parents.
- Get school counselors on board to educate youths on this topic.
- Educate attendees at sporting events.



# WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

## **Educate yourself**

Learn what types of prescription drugs can be abused. Ask the doctor or pharmacist when you receive a prescription if it has potential for abuse.

## **Talk with your teen**

Find out what they know about prescription drug or cough medicine abuse. Teens often think that prescription drugs are safer than street drugs, which is not true.

## **Set clear rules**

Tell your teen to never take medications that have not been prescribed for them, share their medications with others or take their own medications in greater quantities than prescribed.

## **Safeguard all drugs at home**

Control access and monitor quantities. Ask friends and family to safeguard their prescription drugs as well.

## **Conceal and dispose of old or unused medicines**

Put them in the trash (remove from their original containers). Do not flush drugs down the toilet. Remove or cover identifying information from bottles, so they cannot be used for prescription refills.

## **Resources for proper disposal of old or unused medicines:**

[whitehousedrugpolicy.gov](http://whitehousedrugpolicy.gov)



## SUMMARY

At the end of the evening, each participant was asked to complete an event evaluation. The survey asked for feedback regarding the forum and requested ideas and suggestions for future forums. Participants were also given an opportunity to suggest future forum topics. Eighty-seven participants responded to the survey. Each respondent indicated that they enjoyed participating in the forum.

Participants were asked to complete this sentence:

"Overall, I thought the forum was \_\_\_\_\_."

Youth responses:

- a great idea and a good experience for any youth to attend.
- informative and useful, but not an immediate help.
- fun.
- well organized.
- a great experience to learn and incorporate different ideas from other youths.

Adult responses:

- valuable insight into each other's thoughts.
- informative and provided a safe place to share ideas.
- well organized and addressed real issues facing today's youth.
- great communication.
- productive.

Participants suggested the following topics for future forums: drunk driving, obesity, bullying, teen relationships with parents, abstinence, youth driving, dating, sex, ways to improve school academics and/or the importance of school activities and self-mutilation.

The Department of Youth Planning and Development and the Youth Services Citizen Board will use the information gathered from survey responses to make improvements as they plan the next forum.

## CONCLUSION

The Youth Services Citizen Board and the Department of Youth Planning and Development extend heartfelt thanks to all who participated in the 2009 Community Youth Forum. Because of individuals who care enough to be involved in the Chesterfield County community, our forum continues to be a success. Chesterfield County remains a wonderful place to live and raise a family with the support of its residents in projects like this. We also greatly appreciate our volunteers and facilitators for their leadership and support. Thank you for your time and for your continued dedication to this project.

Information gathered from the discussion groups will be used to develop and refine strategies for implementing the county's comprehensive youth development plan. We invite forum participants and other community members to build on the forum by expanding and further exploring the ideas and strategies generated in the discussion groups.



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If we can assist you in any way, or for more information, please visit the [Youth Planning and Development Web page](http://chesterfield.gov/youth-planning-and-development) at [chesterfield.gov](http://chesterfield.gov). You may also call 804-796-7100 or e-mail [youthservices@chesterfield.gov](mailto:youthservices@chesterfield.gov).

## **SPECIAL THANKS TO:**

*Midlothian Kiwanis Club*

*Little Caesars Pizza*

*Waitkus & Associates Counseling for donating door prizes*





Chesterfield County has been named one of the 100 Best Communities for Young People by America's Promise — The Alliance for Youth. The winning communities were recognized for their commitment to provide healthy, safe and caring environments for young people.

Chesterfield County was selected because of its strong commitment to young people from birth to age 21, which is demonstrated through the availability of a range of youth-related programs and services that indirectly or directly help foster the 40 developmental assets. These efforts are the result of partnerships and collaboration among many nonprofit and faith organizations, as well as the schools and local government.

America's Promise, which was founded by Gen. Colin Powell, is a broad-based alliance whose members work together to ensure the well-being of children and youths. For more information about America's Promise, visit [americaspromise.org](http://americaspromise.org).



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